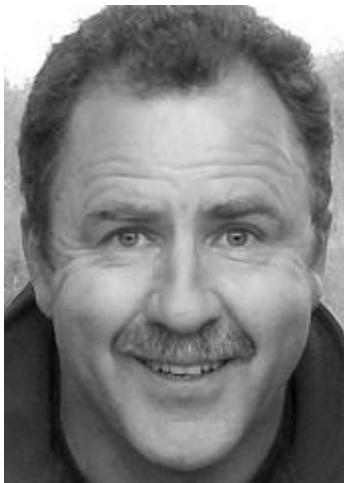


## Don Ledingham

### Tempted by a free horizon



My first published poem in my own name was Johnnie Wilson's Day, which won the [Leopard Magazine](#) poetry competition in 1993. At the time the £500 prize was the biggest in Scotland for a single poem. I published my first volume of poems "Langshaw Echoes" later that year which sold nearly 700 copies. In 1994 I won the Leopard prize again, this time with "Auld Brookie". I published my second volume of poems "The Clipping" in 1997. In 1999 I formed a creative partnership with photographer Gordon Hunter. We worked on a series of picture poems which linked my poetry with Gordon's photographs of scenes from the endangered Scottish Borders rural heritage at the turn of the millennium. In 2000 we were invited to exhibit our work, entitled "Scottish Inheritance" at the Scottish Writer's Museum, on Edinburgh's Royal Mile. The exhibition raised over £3000 which we donated to the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Society following the tragedy which was the 2001 foot and mouth outbreak. I've been influenced at various times by Norman McCaig, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, George Mackay Brown, Edwin Morgan, Seamus Heaney, Philip Larkin, [Yehuda Amichai](#), Robert Burns, Hugh McDairmid, and R.S Thomas. I've recently started working on a new collection of work which I hope to publish early in 2010 entitled "Surface Diving".

Don Ledingham, Smithy House, Langshaw, 2009  
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### Surface Diving

Diving deep and plunging  
Perpendicular to the present  
Sliding down through versions of myself  
Identikit recognitions fleetingly glimpsed  
This boy, this youth, this man  
Standing beyond, detached, not me  
Living in their worlds  
Deeper and darker  
Reaching out beyond the light  
Where self no longer  
Has a place.

### December Milking

Shackled to his rock  
He orbits round his chosen hours,  
Yet it chose him,  
Picked him from the crib  
And left him here without a place to go.

Yet his ladies wait their turn  
And heave their heavy bags  
Between their spindled legs,  
Suspending from a scaffold frame  
Their precious loads,  
Which bulge against their swing.

Escaping from the gloom,  
Their well-chewed breaths  
Rise above the biting cold,  
And white trickles from a teat  
Tracing lazy lines and circles  
Amongst the shit slapped floor.

He locks into his ritual  
And readies for the dance,  
Pacing round his pulpit,  
Gently laying hands  
And tracing daughters back  
Some thirty years.

A meeting of machines,  
One bred, one made,  
Each built to fit the other,  
Turning green to white,  
As pulsing beat of stainless steel  
Sucks its greedy fill.

He takes his pride from here,  
Measuring against the past,  
Driven on by need  
To prove himself, against himself,  
To make his mark upon the land.

And yet, not far from here  
It lies in sterile lines,  
Loss leader for the giants,  
Who squeeze pennies from the tit,  
And slowly close their careless fingers  
Around a way of life.

#### **A Piper's Farewell**

I heard them call the numbers from the crowd  
And each stepped forwards to the edge  
To take a plaited, tasseled cord  
And lay me gently in my grave.  
I'd stood too often in the past  
And watched this scene  
And watched the soil tossed upon a polished box,

(It sounds much louder from down here)

And then, from far above my head  
I heard the pipes begin to play  
And slowly lift me from this place.  
And standing upright once again  
I threw my drones across my shoulder  
And matched him note for note.

We walked together, happy now  
To leave that rotten, rotting body  
To feel the joy of freedom  
To feel the ground beneath my feet  
To feel the wind against my face  
To feel the air within my lungs.  
We marched a slow march  
My kilt swung upon my hips  
My fingers caressing every note  
He stopped; I didn't; I couldn't; I wouldn't.  
Marching on and on  
Free to march upon my hill  
To take my pipes  
And play my tunes at will.

### **A Book of Remembrance**

Sandwiched between  
Ledgerwood-Walker. B.G.  
And Lee. A.T.  
Is Ledingham. D. J.  
So many unknown people  
Sharing the same space.  
A regiment of L's  
Waiting by their phones.

### **A Child's Hand**

Take your child by the hand  
And hold the future there.  
Keep him upright if you can  
Release him if you dare.

### **A Place to Start Walking From**

A place to start walking from  
Can never be a destination on its own  
But must settle for being a setting off point  
Within easy reach of somewhere more interesting  
Just like the man who has many friends  
But who never receives a visitor  
Or the woman who has much to tell

But never features in others conversations.

Perhaps a place to start walking from

Is not such a bad place after all?

### **A Poacher's Regret**

The torchlight scans the silent surface,

Drawing patterns with its deadly spot.

Its pencil beam slipping through reflections,

Intrudes another world.

As slips of silver belly-up before its path,

Vanishing in puffs of silt,

Or pause a second,

Before they scream beyond detection.

Waving weed, an old pipe and a big black stone,

Each hold the light in turn,

And each stretch a heartbeat,

In false anticipation.

Then, as eyes water with the wind,

Its destined form appears,

The massive shape berths hard against the bank.

Smoothing through the water's edge.

For reasons best known to itself,

Disdain, fatigue or resignation?

It lies untroubled by the light,

As instinct drives it on.

To travel oceans on an ageless trip,

It had surely left all dangers far behind.

Yet sliding in beyond its sight,

An arm extends the stainless hook.

Its body gently waves,

As the point draws level with its gills,

And in a fatal instant,

I feel its weight.

### **A Pound of Flesh**

"I'll take a pound"

"A pound?"

"A pound" he said.

"Now take this tree".

I held the first of many.

And listened to living memories

To opinions and judgement

Recollection and principle.

I never thought to interrupt his flow.

He didn't need me.

Fighting in the jungle

Burma to the Borders.

Trees, Churchill, Hiroshima

Atlantic crossings, dairies, Reivers,

Clydesdales, Reich and home.

Somewhere, deep inside  
There lurked a tap.  
It flowed.  
Seventy years of human experience  
Unedited  
But seen only from one window.  
And yet  
A pound well spent.

This poem recounts the first time I met Haig Douglas. I simply asked him if I could walk my dog on his land. Haig Douglas was a member of the famous Border family of the same name. He farmed at Glendearg for over forty years and took a particular interest in tree planting and local history. He fought in the jungle campaigns during the Second World War and never took a backward step in his life. Haig Douglas died in 1998.

### **A World Without Adjectives**

Bare,  
Bones,  
Monochrome,  
Stripped lines,  
Which only come alive  
Within the mind.  
Growing there  
Like seeds,  
Which flourish  
Despite neglect  
And stony ground

### **Address Book**

Looking for a number  
Amongst the couples.  
All neatly stacked,  
In alphabetical order,  
I saw some names,  
Some single names.  
Cut off from their partners  
By a bold black line.  
Gone,  
Just like that,  
One by one,  
Picked off by the years.

### **After the Rabbit Shoot**

It held my eye  
Meeting me in silent witness  
Distorting my reflection  
With its unyielding stare

It forced my hand  
Leaving me without an option

And I closed its window on the world  
Before it got too close.

### **Assault on Smailholm Tower**

Cold shadows grow their silhouette  
Against a waking sky  
As monochrome surrenders to the dawn  
And sandstone embers flicker into life.  
Flat sunbeams scream across the ground  
To sacrifice themselves  
Against the stubborn walls.  
Their orange fire explodes upon the eye  
And leave their imprint on the mind  
Long after walls have turned back to stone  
And daylight's cutting edge departs.

### **Black Tie**

Amongst the silks and paisley patterns  
The dicky bows and shepherd's tartans  
The checks and asymmetric lines  
The emblems of forgotten times.  
There lurks a dark oppressive presence.  
It beat me to the finish of this poem.  
Returned to the back of the wardrobe  
I catch the occasional glimpse in the morning  
And hope it bides its time.

### **Boundaries**

Submerging silhouettes  
Their rotting half made whole  
By calm reflections  
Support their rusted barbs  
Which twist and intertwine  
In sad, demented lines  
An edge no more  
They fight to keep their hold  
To save their kind  
Or have they,  
With purpose lost  
Simply waded to their end  
As water and the land  
Reclaim their liberty  
By biding time.

Sweeping to the surface  
From galactic depths  
Two hundred years boil, twist and spiral  
Their currents splitting  
On giant boulders  
Surging, swelling  
Flash flooding  
Carving deep valleys  
Which open onto plains  
Smoothing into eddies  
Backwaters, rivulets  
As deep pools  
Of timelessness  
Becalm their flow  
An instant,  
Or lifetime?

### **Button Jar**

There they found it,  
Where she'd left it,  
Tucked behind the tins and jars.  
A lifetime held within a moment,  
A secret trove,  
They dare not open.  
Buttons cut from every garment,  
He had worn throughout their union,  
Simple shirts to army greatcoats,  
Brass and bone and wood and leather,  
Each one held a magic measure,  
Provided her a priceless treasure.  
Now she's gone,  
They've lost their lustre.  
The thread is broken,  
Disconnected,  
Partial stories,  
Recollected,  
Cannot fill the button jar

### **Shoveling memories**

The North Atlantic swallowed them whole  
Covering their tracks with freezing fog  
Whilst deep beneath the waterline he prayed  
Shoveling coal to push them home.  
They felt the presence of the wolves  
And huddled close as if for warmth  
Whilst terrified eyes scanned the careless sea  
And still he shoveled his inferno.  
They saw the wake too late  
And screamed their pointless warning.  
It broke in two - BROKE IN TWO!  
21,000 tonnes and 600 men.  
And every Sunday afternoon  
He comes here to feed the ducks

And shovel memories  
To the back of his mind

### **Cotswold Stone**

Honeyed  
Smooth  
Perfection  
But churchyard  
Names  
Dissolve  
Before your eyes  
A surface -  
Reclaimed

### **Crow Concerto**

Black minims,  
Crotchetts and quavers,  
Eight birds to a bar.  
The five line stave sags heavy with their weight,  
As three semi tones and an A sharp,  
Change places.  
Before melody takes off into  
Flights of  
Pandemonium

### **Crow Trap**

Abandoned to its savage task  
The fleshless carcass,  
A skeleton of death,  
Awaits in shamed seclusion.  
Its tortured beams  
Treat gravity and symmetry  
As twin impostors  
And build false shelter  
Deep within the moor.  
It draws eccentric wing-beats  
To its vortex  
With stench of rotting flesh  
And envy at an other's fortune.  
An ironic perch  
Bathed in fleeting sunshine  
Gives little hint  
Of terrors held within.  
Inside, a black whirlwind  
Thrashes against the wire  
In frenzied replay  
Tempted by the free horizon  
And a towering sky.  
Until released by man  
Who throws its neck  
Without a thought

And drops it to the ground.  
Free at last.

### **Cynic**

Beware!  
Bitterness,  
Can foul your soul.  
Its brackish taste  
Lends acrid flavour  
To the sweetest dish.  
Twisting smile to sneer  
To feed off  
Blame and scorn,  
As envy and contempt,  
Infecting with their bile,  
Give jaundiced eyes their proof.  
Until,  
It turns on itself.  
And eats us from within

### **Dictionary**

Words,  
Parked passively  
In ordered ranks.  
Bombs without warheads.  
Needing only  
Juxtaposition  
To give them life.

### **DL + GL 82-07**

You found our letters  
Cut deep, bottomless,  
Felt them smooth against the rough bark,  
Traced your finger over our years  
Closed your eyes and followed the lines.  
Imagining these people, us people  
Who etched our mark here, momentarily,  
Strangers, intruding on your space  
Reaching forwards to ask our question  
Our uncomfortable truth  
Whose lovers vow, proclaimed here  
In boastful anonymity  
Carves itself upon your mind

### **Doorway on the past**

There is a door in our house.  
I stripped it bare,  
One wet Sunday afternoon.  
Written, up-side down,  
In the bottom left hand corner,  
Was a message.  
“Remember to feed the horses”  
It’s still there,  
Under ‘Sunburst Yellow Satin Gloss’

### **Double Beds**

Make no sense.  
For function is not served  
By rolling to the middle,  
Wrestled sheets,  
Flatulence,  
Or snores.  
Yet husbands  
Feel abandoned  
At the threat  
Of single beds.

### **Douglas Fir**

With no-one watching,  
It shouldered through  
The grudging ground.  
Thrusting up from deep  
Within the Earth  
An instant spire,  
Which pierced the sky  
At perfect angles,  
And disappeared  
Above the clouds.  
To dream,  
As dreamers often do,  
Of breaking free  
From comfort’s chains,  
And striding on a fragile soil  
Leaving footprints in its wake

Not many swear an oath and keep their word  
But you held it through a lifetime  
And stretched it to a way of life.  
Husband, father, son and friend  
Your family extended to a community  
And we sought refuge in your knowledge  
In your vitality and wisdom.  
Protected against our fear of suffering  
We passed our worries on  
And you absorbed them  
Putting them in a black bag  
Within your soul.  
At your happiest in the kitchen  
Fore-and-aft upon your head  
Juggling six pans and assorted dishes  
Leaving chaos in your wake  
As the radio reeled and Strathspeyed  
In the background.  
What a talent telly missed.  
Or fishing on Menteith  
Better still if one up on John Munro!!  
Or sitting in the stand at Easter Road  
Memories of Stanton and O'Rourke  
Or Eddie Turnbull's quip to Alan Gordon  
"Your problem is that aw yir brains are in yir bloody heed"  
Or treating Georgie Best for an 'allergic reaction to alcohol'.  
Or sowing seeds on fertile soil  
and watching neat rows of shoots appear  
To mark the start of another year.  
You loved the challenge of a diagnosis  
And would treat the person not the illness  
Long before it became fashionable.  
Medical books and magazines  
Would scatter on the floor  
As you set about a problem  
Like a terrier would a bone.  
And in days of greed and envy  
Where some work only for reward  
You were driven by a duty that few can understand  
Needing no more recognition  
Than a welcome in the street.  
With your hustle-bustle action  
And your hair stuck up on end  
You brought light to any room  
Upon which you might descend  
There are words that might describe you  
Caring, selfless, teacher, 'Doc' and fan  
Professional physician or a couthy countryman  
But words can never capture  
The essence of the man  
We knew as Doctor Jimmy  
Husband, father, son and friend.

In memory of my father Dr Jimmy Ledingham

### **Drystanes**

A black line snakes over the hill,  
Sheltering a thin ribbon of white,  
Fractured only when it turns to the sun.  
Like a child's colouring book,  
It marks an outline to be filled,  
With the hues of the farming year.  
One man's pride from another time,  
You can touch a morning's toil,  
And wonder at his practised hand.  
But we show no deference to its creators,  
Too functional to be revered.  
The final insult comes in disrepair,  
Where it lies trapped between,  
Two parallel lines of measured charge.  
Perhaps a fitting epitaph after all

### **Elegy for a farmer**

The two diggers wait patiently,  
Sharing a smoke between their labours,  
Grateful for an hours rest,  
While the sods lie neatly stacked,  
And a green cloth covers their toil.  
Friends, file dutifully into the Church,  
Or stand outside,  
Staring at their thoughts.  
Aware of their own mortality,  
They bow their heads,  
Or clasp a heavy hand behind their backs.  
The speakers crackle into silence,  
Before the minister's words carry across the valley,  
Coming to rest on the distant hillface.  
"Our first hymn" hangs in the air.  
Breaking into life only at the familiar refrain.  
The minister avoids the expected,  
And gives us a sermon for the man.  
No filling in the gaps here!  
"A man with more friends than acquaintances"  
He might have left it at that.  
Memories are triggered in four hundred heads,  
As the man is resurrected by our thoughts.  
Who said there's not an after life?  
The image breaks as another hymn is sacrificed,  
While the minister sings only the notes he can reach.  
I watch you carried from the Church.  
A last exposure to soft summer air.  
The bearers' heels leave their imprint on the grass,  
As your life left its on ours,  
Trapped now in the past.  
Laid down on boards above your slot,  
The last rituals are played out.  
Lowered hand over hand,

You come to rest,  
At peace in your beloved ground.

### **Empathy**

To step inside another  
To step outside yourself  
To have the power to project  
To be someone other than 'myself'.  
For some it is a short step  
For others more a leap  
Yet others feel they get there  
When all they do is weep.  
For many there is comfort  
They pretend when others feel  
They have pity and sincerity  
And say that time will heal.  
But I prefer the notion  
Much more than words or deed  
That it's more to do with sharing  
Much more than hearts' that bleed.  
To celebrate with others  
Their victories and success  
Is more difficult than pity  
If they have more than you possess

### **Evening Restoration**

Buttressed walls support a vaulted sky  
Frescoed with the Milky Way  
Orion, Jupiter and Mars.  
As lace-draped moon  
Unfolds its velvet mantle  
Embracing shadows  
With its spectred kiss.  
Beneath gigantic gables  
The nave falls silent  
Blinded by the dark  
And passing years  
Where time is measured by the lifetimes  
Of an acorn planted  
By fathers for their sons.  
Yet freed from careless feet  
It comes once more to life  
As tumbled walls rebuild  
And altars rise  
From plunder and neglect.  
Restored to three dimensions  
By a star-specked night.

### **Exposure**

Have you ever stood on deck  
And tried to shelter from anxiety's biting wind,  
Broken from routine's comfort  
And felt the stinging spray of isolation?  
Or stepped out all but naked  
And heard ridicule's distant thunder,  
And lost your way  
Forced to walk,  
Bent forwards,  
Into the gathering storm?  
Or weighed anchor  
Thinking danger's squall had passed,  
To find yourself alone  
As falling pressure banks the fog?  
I have stood there,  
Stand there,  
Times.  
Amidst jeopardy's shifting ice pack.  
Confidence floating just above the waves  
Self-doubt,  
Lurking,  
Just below the water line.

### **Flying Scotsman**

Standing in a row  
Over Portobello shunting yard.  
Fingers pushed through the wire.  
Duffel coats and gloves,  
Socks round ankles.  
Black,  
Everything black.  
Potbellied trains  
Spitting steam  
Pushing and pulling  
Hissing,  
Fighting?  
Fighting against the tide.  
All come to a standstill  
As the Flying Scotsman  
Flashes under the bridge  
And disappears from view  
But not from sight.

### **Forth Rail Bridge**

His eye travelled as the crow flies  
Stretching from one shore to the next  
Fusing the gap within his mind  
Short-circuiting the distances  
By reaching out his arms  
And gifting us the time.  
Insatiable, we stuff our pockets  
Hoarding it, storing it  
Shaping it, shaving it

Squeezing three days into one  
Stockpiling the seconds  
Higher and higher.  
And yet it always wins  
By yielding us no interest  
And never being cashed.

### **Friendly Fire**

When setting out  
To praise,  
To celebrate,  
Or glorify,  
Take heed, that  
From the moment  
Words depart your lips,  
That they will detonate  
On friendly ground,  
Unseen, and  
Unintentioned,  
Leaving casualties  
In their wake.

### **Grandfather Clock**

TICK.....TOCK.....TICK.....TOCK.....TICK.....TOCK.....  
TOCK.....TICK.....TOCK .....TICK.....VERSES.....ECHO  
.....UP.....STAIRS.....SEARCHING .....OUT .....EVERY  
.....ROOM.....FOUND.....ME.....FEIGNING.....SLEEP  
.....AND WORMED.....INTO.....MY.....BRAIN.....THE TOCK.....BOOMED.....FROM ITS  
CAVERNOUS.....CHEST.....  
.....AND THE TICK.....FOLLOWED.....AT ITS.....LEISURE... ....  
SECONDS.....STRETCHED.....IN MEASURED.....SILENCE..  
.....AS MY FEET.....SLAP.....ON THE COLD.....  
FLOOR.....I STOOD.....ABOVE.....THE MOONLIT..... ....LOBBY.....YOUR FORM.....  
PRESSED.....AGAINST.....THE WALL.....I TREAD.....WARILY  
.....DOWN.....THE STEPS.....AND PAUSE.....AGAIN..... TO GATHER.....  
.....STRENGTH..... ....YOUR HEARTBEAT.....STOPS.....AS I .....GO BY.....AS  
CHAINS.....AND SPRINGS.....AND COGS.....RELEASE.....THE HOUR..... STRIKES.....AND  
BEFORE.....IT FINISHED.....I .....WAS BACK.....BETWEEN.....THE SHEETS.....TOCK.....  
TICK.....TOCK .....TICK.....TOCK.....TICK.....TOCK....

### **Half Ploughed Field**

Have you ever seen  
A half ploughed field.  
One half open  
The other half sealed.  
One half with its guts exposed.  
The other silent  
Secret  
Closed

### **Hayfield**

I found a map.  
A map where  
Rivers never run,  
Where tides will never turn.  
A map where  
Mountains never rise,  
Where valleys never fall,  
Or cities sprawl.  
A map where  
Trees will never grow,  
Where streams  
Will never flow,  
But where,  
For seven days,  
Green waves,  
Will break upon a yellow sun

### **Heartstrings**

Watching the nine o'clock news  
Another cause is born.  
As cameras seek out  
Targets for our compassion  
And correspondents compete to set  
The most appropriate tone.  
Reverential, yet accusing.  
Worshipping at the altar of disaster,  
They point a finger at our comfort.  
And ratings go up another notch.

### **High Tide**

Release a flight of children's' feet,  
Upon a page of virgin sand.  
And watch them tumble, run and leap,  
And trace their freedom on borrowed land.  
Too busy building memories,  
To notice froth tipped fingertips,  
Drawing them towards their edge,  
Or kissing stones with Judas lips.  
Names are dragged beneath the surface,  
Ramparts stormed and footprints sifted.  
The blue cloth wipes across the slate,  
And serves each one an equal fate.  
Reclaiming ground without elation,  
High to low.....a generation

### **Homecoming**

Whilst seven slept in ragged splendour  
I stepped beyond the door  
To steal the skylarked dawn  
And tread the world underfoot,  
But turning back  
I found them gone,  
Surrendered to the years,  
Where wormed beams  
Had crashed the sky  
Upon the fetid floor.  
A rusted nail,  
Above the frozen range,  
Alone within the empty shell,  
Gave life to distant times.  
And then I heard them call  
Within the chimney breast,  
“Who’s there?”  
And stepped beyond the door  
A second time,  
To see them sit and stare  
In wide-eyed solemn wisdom,  
Before they disappeared  
With gentle wings

### **Houseprints**

The wall on the stair  
Is our home’s palmprint.  
Old lathe and plaster  
Pockmarked by generations  
Makes manufactured flatness  
Sterile  
By comparison.

### **Inheritance**

He clings to your back  
Working his thin fingers deep under your skin  
Waiting ‘round every corner  
Ready to shame you with you’re luck.  
It might have been him.  
Visits to the hospital.  
Adult conversations cut off.  
Mid-sentence.  
“Be quiet girl. He needs his sleep”.  
No-one heard your screams.  
He just faded away  
But only in life.  
In death he lived on even stronger  
Never mentioned.

His place reserved.  
You would show them  
Just see if you didn't.  
Doing the work of two men  
They never saw you.  
Too busy with their loss.  
And now, trapped by the habits  
Of a lifetime.  
Proving, proving, proving.  
We look on in wonder.  
And they loved you all the time

### **Johnnie Wilson's Day**

My body shaks with unseen tremmles,  
Fixed een stare wi'oot relief,  
Dinna just stan' there ony longer  
Let's be aff awa frae here,  
Ower grass and weed and thistle  
Stretch and coil, stretch and coil,  
Whit a feelin', freedom, life.  
"Keep weel wide!"  
I'm mindin' fine  
Steady man, I ken the way.  
Doon.  
There, here nae bother.  
Proddin' forards, gently dis it  
Lifted weel and a'thegither  
Johnnie Wilson, ye'll be pleased as hell.  
Help me noo, I cannae see  
The straightest path frae here to there.  
A coarse auld yin turns, thinks better o' it  
And pushes back to find the front.  
Steady pace, it's as ye taught me,  
Working yin side then the ither.  
Yir silent words ring in my heed  
We reach the circle wi'oot mishap.  
You stand.  
I wait.  
They graze.  
Bide oor time,  
Slowly, slowly  
A gap appears, it's a' we need.  
I'm in it niver had a chance.  
Push on noo towards the feenish.  
Why does it always have tae end?  
Dae yirr pert noo, a final flourish  
Just be canny with yon stick!  
But they are broken, howked and humled  
And any sowel could close a gate.  
We've won or so ye tell me,  
I'm niver just sure what that means  
Ye reach doon and stroke centuries of preparation.  
But let's be aff awa frae here,  
Ower grass and weed and thistle,  
Stretch and coil, stretch and coil

Whit a feelin', freedom, life.

Johnnie Wilson was a British Sheepdog trial champion.

### **Keeled Over**

Rising up from cinnamon sand  
The keel slips  
From cinnabar  
To flush vermillion  
Then ochre, oxide red and umber  
Its alabaster waterline  
Sets off the cobalt glaze  
The garter-blue and sapphire  
Rising into  
Amethyst, lavender and lilac  
A livery ignited  
By a phosphorous sun

### **Kitchen's Clock**

For Jill's fortieth  
I bought us an old wall clock.  
Keeps perfect time  
Yet has one erratic chime.  
At four strikes nine  
At ten rings seven.  
Then, Six, Three, One,  
Five, Four, Eleven.  
Just as a I think I've cracked the code  
It switches to another mode.  
A woman's clock  
After all

### **Lambing 14th March 1999**

Disgorged to mother's nithered earth  
His comfort bursts and splits  
The oozing form ripped by  
Wind's abrasive edge  
As soil reaches up to claim its own  
Tempting him to sleep, to yield  
To take the comfort of the corpse  
As frenzied nails fix him to the coffin ground.  
And just as howling peace descends  
He rudely flies and swings across  
The field, cheated from his end  
By roughened, caring, careless hands,  
Which dress him in a perished skin  
And set him on a stamping mother  
To live again in Easter's Resurrection

### **Langshaw Echoes**

If you go up the Ellwyn  
Two miles from the Fairydean  
You'll come on an enchanted place  
The best I've ever seen.  
Now stand outside the Smithy House  
An close your eyes and listen  
You'll hear the echoes of the past  
And all that we've been missing.  
You'll hear the water on the wheel  
That drove the old sawmill  
You'll hear the echoes of the past  
I wouldn't bear them ill.  
Now hear the children in the school  
All chanting out their tables  
And hear the clanking of the team  
Returning to their stables.  
Now hush you now and hold your peace  
What's that I hear a ringing?  
Why it's the smith at work again  
He's seeing to a shoeing.  
And hear the cackle from the fields  
Sheaves gathered in the sun  
The sound of over twenty folk  
When now theirs only one.  
Now listen to the squeezebox  
To the shouts and awful squeals  
The village hall is shaking  
To the rhythm of the reels.  
And late at night you hear them  
As they make their way back home  
To Colmslie and Glendale they trail  
Not scared to walk alone.  
Now hear the echoes further back  
The Reivers and their men  
Returning from a battle  
They've done their part again.  
The building of the towers  
Rings out across the land  
Each blessed stone they put in place  
Was lifted up by hand.  
There are some who say that echoes  
Are really best forgot  
That life is for the here and now  
And to settle for your lot.  
But I would just remind us  
Not to live our lives so fast  
For the noise we make today  
Will join the echoes of the past.

**Last of the Blackies**

Gently tilt a hillside,  
And pour its vintage at our feet.  
Shake free the stubborn drops,  
Which try to hold their place  
Amongst their own,  
But gather speed  
And bunch and rush  
The narrowed neck,  
To spill upon the floor,  
Leaving us to smash  
The empty bottle  
On stony ground.

**Leaderfoot Lady**

I watch her through December trees  
Her straight lines and perfect curves  
Entwine with nature's random pattern  
She lifts her skirt well clear  
And dips her toes  
In the cool black water  
Her amber stones soften in the sun  
Like tears in an empty wine glass  
And melt into their reflection  
Leaving her pathway in the sky  
To wither on the vine  
A monument to Beeching's folly

**Leap of Faith**

A long legged hare  
Running in the sun  
Stopped and smiled  
Twitched its ears  
And in an easy bound  
Leapt the stone built wall.

Forty feet down  
Prostrate on the concrete floor  
It lay  
As if transfixed  
Mid-Jump  
Staining the dried bed  
With its afterglow

**Long Lost**

An empty handshake  
Held too long  
Fills the void  
Of twenty years indifference.

Memories squeezed dry by time  
Flicker briefly in stilted conversation  
As we measure ourselves  
Against our past.  
We know the secret code  
The subtle clues that  
Mark out our achievements  
And hide our disappointments.  
Neither of us listens to the other  
Too busy keeping score  
Until the winner strikes  
The winning blow

### **Lost Fountain Pen**

Gold nibbed  
Blue enamelled  
'Parker'  
Made to measure  
For a hand.  
Gave signature  
Some style.  
Yet a Biro  
Wrote these  
Lines.

### **Luck**

Turn a mirror on itself  
And draw your focus to a point.  
A soundless endless echo  
Which vanishes from sight.

And so we lift them from their hills  
And pack them in their pen  
These living single summers  
Single summers without end.

See the noble and the haughty  
Amongst the rabble and the dregs  
The blue blood of the princess  
Beside the bent and bowdy legged.

So will you take my luck sir?  
I have a polished penny here  
Polished by our lifetimes  
Polished by our fear.

### **Monica**

You celebrated your 40th birthday last week

So I heard  
At home with your mother  
She brings you breakfast in bed  
And sets your clothes out on a chair  
Jerked out of the groove at 19  
By a corner that came too soon  
The bus collects you every morning  
And you wave goodbye as you step aboard  
Wiping mist from the glass  
But seeing only with your eyes  
Your journey stopped long ago  
Dreams and ambitions  
Replaced by three metal plates.

### **Old Boots**

Supple and forgiving  
They caress the ground,  
Beaten into shape  
By craftsmen of the Cairngorms.  
The Lairig Ghru,  
Ben Ledi and The Cobbler,  
Glens and Bens,  
Corries and ridges,  
High Level passes  
Grip scrubbed smooth  
By mileage unclocked.

### **Outwintering**

The white tide cuts across the hill  
And marks a different world  
Which freezes to the touch.  
A sky which sharpens to a point,  
A surface scraped by bitter blast,  
And there,  
Ignoring with a wary eye,  
Stood the frost-backed beast.

His burnished chest,  
Reflects against the glare  
And makes meaning,  
Of magnificent,  
With shoulders bursting  
Through their hide,  
As he lugs his heavy burden  
Towards his chosen one.

A red-roan seven-seasoned mother,  
Who thrives where others perish  
Has stood the test of time  
And readies for her chore.  
To take his weight,  
To take his seed,

To take his life.

### **Photographer's Curse**

Beddit in ma comfy grund  
Chowin' on ma dreams  
I spied ye wi ma half shut ee  
An' heard yer pechs and groans.  
As on ye struggl't up ma hill  
An' heft up oan yer back  
A monster wi three legs or mair  
Came climbin' oot yer sack.  
A many splintered whirligig  
It danced upon the rocks  
Until ye got the better o' it  
An' tied it doon wi blocks  
The horny-goloch wisnae beat  
Its legs it push'd an' sprouted  
An' afore I even kent ma'sel  
I had hupped and shouted.  
But as the sun began to rise  
It clutched ye tae its breest  
Despite ma warnings and ma cries  
It wis aboot tae feast.  
So up I stotted tae yer aid  
I couldnae tak nae mair  
An' looked the beastie in the eye  
An' gied ma cauldest stare.  
But whit a stramash did ye stir  
Ye shouted, screamed and cried  
An' then ye picked a muckle stane  
An' at ma heid ye shied.  
Weel patience din I charged ye baith  
It folded wi' a shunt  
An' you ye graceless donnert man  
Went fleein' wi a dunt.  
An' galloped aff wi scittered shanks  
Yer breek arse at yer ankles  
Wi'oot a single word o' thanks  
As the monster lay in fankles.

### **Picture Book Mind**

On a cold, wet Sunday afternoon  
He travelled thousands of miles and hundreds of years.  
Flitting through time and space as boredom dictated,  
Taking on existences as he pleased,  
While his eyes never betrayed the truth.  
His bed could change, chameleon-like,  
From a starship to a stage-coach,  
From a bus to a battle-cruiser.  
And each time he would play his part  
Under the directions of his picture book mind.  
He could kill with a smile on his face,  
Or crumple on the floor,

Clutching his bloody chest with a silent scream.  
While his brother conjured his own backdrop to every scene,  
Switching from ally to foe without suggestion,  
Happy to die with a peanut butter sandwich in his hand.  
How I envy them their freedom,  
Their untutored ability,  
To step beyond the narrow boundaries of reality.  
Untroubled by the false dignity of common sense.  
Enjoy it while you can my sons,  
Education,  
Is lying in wait!

### **Ploughing the Meadow**

They ploughed over the meadow today  
A Dowdeswell five furrow reversible plough  
Passed back and forth  
Executing a thoughtlessly good job  
Turning under a summer's roll call  
Smooth stalked meadow grass  
Fescue, Common Bent and Foxtail  
Sweet Vernal, Burnet Saxifrage  
Speedwell, Tormentil and Buttercup  
A palette of names, entombed  
And this evening I watched a Barn Owl  
Drift ghost-like across the sterile ground  
Quarreling again and again, deceived  
By a landscape betrayed

### **Poems in a High Walled Garden**

She sipped her lemon tea  
Within a high walled garden,  
Beneath a perfect square of sky  
Breached only by occasional clouds or sliding gulls.  
Her roses, sacrificed themselves upon the walls,  
Reaching upwards to their freedom  
Until they lost their grasp towards the top,  
Their blood-red bodies falling back, spread-eagled on the wire.  
Relentless shadows crept across the ground,  
Shrinking, squeezing, pressing out the flowers from her space.  
And throughout - despite the darkness carving out the light,  
She made the most of every colour, of every scent and every sense.  
As single lines were drawn up,  
From deep within a hidden source,  
And linked together in endless chains  
To lift her far beyond this place.  
She could raise a sonnet from a page,  
Hold it gently in her hands before releasing it to freedom  
To fly and soar beyond her sight,  
These pictures grew and filled the void.  
Her garden never died, never fell to winter.  
The high walled garden became her paradise,  
A refuge, where her four score years and four

Gave way to the reality of her mind,  
Where roamed a woman - in the height of summer.

### **Pointer - still life**

His speed dances to a stop  
As he zeroes on the scent.  
Yet his stillness has more power  
Than his flight.  
And just as shade shows up the light,  
As winter makes the spring,  
His frozen stride  
Holds us,  
And our imaginations,  
For a brief,  
Exquisite,  
Moment,  
And we forget ourselves.

### **Pylon**

Held fast in a geometric stance,  
You treat us with disdain,  
Too intent upon your task,  
As your reflections telescope into the distance.  
A roller coaster from the unknown.  
Sharing our space as an uninvited guest,  
As a guardian of others' progress,  
You resonate a note of discord,  
As our lifeblood passes through your veins.  
Yet still you are despised!  
Borrowing the dimensions of an ancient oak,  
You reject the seasons,  
Untroubled by their Rhythm,  
Preferring instead perpetual winter,  
And the bare bones of a skeletal form.  
A slave to the logic of supply and demand,  
You follow orders without question,  
Confident in your conformity.  
And, if threatened,  
You'd pull your jackboots from the ground.

### **Raindrops**

Clinging for its life,  
It grew slowly,  
A window on the world  
Before gathering itself,  
To fly an instant  
Only to burst,  
Upon the smooth stone.  
Clinging for its life,  
It grew slowly,  
A window on the world.

Before gathering itself,  
To fly an instant.  
Only to burst,  
Upon the smooth stone.  
Clinging for its life.....

### **Reflections on a weighting sky**

Let me roll  
My line upon  
A Black pearl sky  
To catch my passage  
From timeless depths.  
And let me  
Cast my mind  
To float upon  
The gold,  
Tempting memories to bite,  
To take them,  
Taste them,  
Just once more,  
Before,  
Returning them,  
Unharmed,  
To a weighting sky.

### **Roofless church**

Black jagged stars  
Burst the leaded glass  
As pigeons stain the pews  
And darkness fills the void.

Shattered Slates  
Expose the blackened beams  
Growing grass at fifty feet  
And darkness fills the void

Graffiti screams  
Its thoughtless filth  
Whilst litter dances at the door  
And darkness fills the void

All for the convenience  
Of a faith without a home  
A faith without a fee  
And darkness fills the void

### **Baby Scan**

A shape lies heavy in the sac,  
As silence echoes 'round magnolia walls.

Images, traced radar-like  
Search the lifeless fog.  
No happy pointing to head and feet.  
No sideshow this!  
Passed on up the line.  
And with each aching minute  
More certainty.  
Hopes, plans, future.  
Ours or his?  
Fade.....

### **Scott's View**

Stared out. Abused by casual eyes  
Which flick through pages  
With coffee table minds.  
We taste but never swallow  
Spitting snapshots  
In long to be forgotten  
Books. Ticking lists  
And moving on before we stop.

Here?  
From where before his grave  
Two horses held his gaze  
In patient pause, to recollect  
The man where dreams of legend  
Came alive. Before they felt time's whip  
And left to pull his shell  
On, and into, history

And so we follow,  
Passing time in shallow worship  
Wearing out the land  
With reckless gape  
Taking comfort that we share  
A place with him  
Before,  
Our horses come.

### **Scree Walk**

Between climb and walk  
We scramble,  
All fours.  
Animals, without the grace,  
Searching for firm ground.  
As leader's debris  
gently shifts us,  
And our steps,  
Back down the hill.  
Next time,  
I'll stay at home.

### **Seeing for ourselves**

We ought never forget  
The feelings of the many, who  
Only judge by the chill  
Upon their collars, Nor should we  
Stand too close to the edge, when  
Warm hands are placed behind our backs, and  
Always listen to those who never speak, but  
Who shake their heads, when  
Others leave the room, alternatively,  
Forget them all, and  
Have faith in our inner child, who  
Sees things as they really are.

### **Sentinel**

Each November the Fieldfares come  
And take up residence in our old apple tree  
And each year the apples hold their place  
Against the frost and slicing Northern winds  
Incongruous inhabitants of a winter scene  
Come January the birds have gone, save two  
Who hunt each other round the tree  
Ignoring rare abundance  
They have no time to feed  
As senseless rivalry provides no respite  
Then one morning a single bird remains  
Still chasing its departed foe  
Whilst clinging remnants of a summer past  
Lose patience and throw themselves to earth  
To lie beside the rival's lifeless form.

### **Severe Weather Warning**

Remember when snow  
Kept its secret to itself.  
Slipping in through the night  
To wake us in the morning,  
All white light and silence.  
Or through a classroom window  
Watching white confetti  
Dancing on the breeze.  
Wishing it would never stop,  
Lessons long forgotten.  
Escaping to roll turfs of snow,  
A criss-cross of giant snail tracks.  
Hands without feeling,  
Ice, sliding down your neck.,  
Warfare without the blood.  
When did it happen?

To feel relief as Christmas snow  
Turns to December rain.  
Give me back my window  
Let it keep its secret to itself.

**She only sees the light**

The Cameron Highlands sounded so exotic  
To be born in the tropics – a colonial miss  
She could have been a proper lady!  
The foundation of happiness,  
Upon which she built a life,  
Proved all too short  
And sailing home – alone  
She built an imaginary world  
Protecting herself by  
Always seeing the best  
Learning how to sacrifice  
Drawing people to her light  
Her innocence balanced by her knowing.  
She waited for her time  
Remembered running on a platform  
Holding him in her arms  
Feeling his emaciated body  
Reunited - a family once more.  
Koreen, Alford, Donside  
Nursing, dances, army  
And somewhere in here a man  
A special man  
A man who made her whole  
Lives and hearts entwined in perfect balance  
A wonderful blur  
26 Duddingston Crescent, Windyridge  
Housewife, receptionist, nurse, mother, lover  
Multitasking on a grand scale  
A Neverland of wondrous memories.  
She nurtured her tribe of boys and girl  
They grew happy and protected  
Yet time takes its toll  
The crocodile's ticking clock  
Catches us all  
Yet laughter, love and happiness  
Drowns out the ticks  
From a woman who only sees the light  
For my mother Barrie Ledingham (nee Gibson) - who was born in Malaya, 1930 where her father was rubber planter.  
He was captured by the Japanese and spent the war in Changi Jail. She was named after J. M Barrie who wrote Peter Pan.

Summer's Day in February  
The rain bounced on the hay shed roof,  
Drumming tunes on the corrugated iron,  
Before it filled the folds,  
And dropped to the ground in an ragged curtain.  
I listened to the rain music,  
And watched the sky sit heavy on its hunkers.  
Holding down the distant hills.

Sucking contrast from the fields.  
My hand closed on the warm hay.  
And twisting a spiral round my fingers,  
I pulled it from its bed.  
Last year's summer crackled.  
And framed between its course and faded stems,  
Was held a blood red poppy,  
Which crumbled to the touch.  
And the rain bounced on the hay shed roof.

### **Sunday Fox**

Distant memories of Sunday kirk  
Where you watched my prayers with a knowing smirk.  
While proudly draped round a widow's neck  
Your glass eye fixed me without a break.  
Alone you knew I was a fraud  
Ma thoughts had never strayed to God.  
A wisdom that a came to fear.  
That,  
And your crooked,  
Sleekit,  
Leer.

### **Swansong**

Land locked  
By freezing fingers  
Crossing ground  
Where waters once had whispered  
Now silk smooth  
And sculpted  
Burnished black  
Glossed and glazed  
Softly squeezing  
With Heavy hands  
Which quietly close  
Upon the song.

### **Swilken Burn Bridge**

Where Old Tom Morris stood and took a line of sight  
Towards an unimagined time, stands a bridge  
Which spans the years and dreams of man.

Its keystone bears the weight of echoes  
And binds them to the stones,  
Which gently rise above the tended calm.

Until it comes once more to life.  
And takes its rightful place  
As a passage from mortality,

Lifting those who float across its sweep,

In joyful pandemonium,  
To taste fame's momentary nectar.

Or those, like Nicklaus, the Golden Bear,  
Who blessed it with his presence  
And turned granite into gold.

Or Spain's magician,  
A sorcerer who touched our lives  
And conjured victories from an empty hand.

Or see a place where Tiger prowls  
His power launched in peerless grace  
Before he crushes breath from man and links alike

Yet for some a set of scaffold steps.  
A gangplank which drops them from the dizzy heights  
In painful public execution.

But all build memories for generations,  
Scratching marks upon life's fleeting walls  
But losing to a simple stone- built arch,

Which takes its comfort that its gateway  
Between two different worlds,  
Lies beyond the wealth of man.

### **The Bricklayer**

Lover of straight lines,  
You hate your work.  
Yet, as if by magic  
Lines of rough brown brick  
Flow from your hands  
And, imperceptibly,  
Paper turns into stone,  
Trapping space in small boxes.  
Before you move on,  
Never looking back,  
Just another brick in your wall.

### **The Clipping**

Surrounded by the Cheviots  
A soaring sun and diving Peewits  
The clipper rigged his gear with a master's expert eye;  
Blades sharpened with affection  
Each caught a bright reflection  
As perfect and as pure as a Curlew's melancholy cry.  
The pace was tight and measured  
As if each moment treasured  
By a man who took his comfort from the magic in his hands;  
His skills were years in making  
Ten thousand hours back breaking  
As a passion grew inside him that no layman understands.

No tricks, no ostentation  
No frills, no decoration  
Yet the veins upon his trunk-like arms were all but fit to burst;  
Shirt soaked with perspiration  
Eyes fixed with concentration  
As if imprisoned by the talent with which he had been cursed.  
He cast each fleece upon the ground  
Amidst the unrelenting sound  
Of dogs and sheep and buzzing shears, a noise that never left the ears;  
His arm found a rhythmic groove  
Hypnotic ease to every move  
As seconds passed and minutes passed from hours into years.  
The day was almost finished  
Yet his art was not diminished  
By the knowledge that his labours were nearly at an end;  
For pride imbued his every action  
He could not slacken by a fraction  
Addicted to a lifestyle to which there is no mend.

### **The Heron**

He was there,  
Waiting,  
I could feel him,  
Obsequious,  
As his haunted presence  
Hunched over his patience.  
Waiting,  
In his morning tails,  
Head dropped his between  
His stooping shoulders,  
Watching,  
Slow in his shadows,  
Waiting,  
Letting them live their lives,  
Carelessly.  
Until,  
Waiting over,  
He fired  
And left,  
With a scream,  
And a smile  
On his face.

### **The Journey**

I stumbled back nearly sixty years.  
As the heady mix of engine oil and leather  
Threw me back into the benchseat  
Alongside the old farmer.  
A giant of a man  
As dour as he was big  
Who gripped the wheel with massive fists.  
And stared out far beyond his field of view.  
I knew better than disturb his practised silence

And craned my neck to see over the polished bonnet  
Lining up the silver emblem  
As my Spitfire's gunsight.  
My game and his peace  
Were broken by a sickly crack  
And in the instant that it hit the glass  
I caught its screaming eye.  
The old man said nothing  
As we rolled to a clumsy halt  
And pulled himself stiffly from his seat.  
The late evening sun cast his shadow forty feet.  
He stooped and lifted the tiny form  
Lost in his callused hand  
And a fragile tear splashed  
Silently on the dusty road.

### **The Kick**

Clutching the ball deep within his maw  
His frame hanging from angled shoulders  
He stepped up to his destiny  
With all the careless confidence  
That comes to those with nature's gifts.  
He plunged his heel deep within the English earth  
And set his ball upon a crown of turf,  
Then drew his arm across his face  
And turned his back upon his foe  
Like some matador before a dying bull.  
No fear, no doubt, no chance of failure  
No stutters, stares or signs of manic ritual  
His eccentric gait,  
A style without peer  
Took him towards the ball.  
Head down, he hits it, lifts it, shifts it  
Wobbles it between the posts  
Between the English hearts  
And with a single moment  
Seals his place in history.

*Dedicated to PC Brown, Rugby Captain of Scotland whose kicking helped Scotland to win the Calcutta Cup match against England in 1973.*

### **The Letter**

Practised fingers slide,  
Between the steel sprung jaw,  
And mark a journey's end.  
The slap on the cold tile floor,  
Echoes 'round the house,  
But no one moves.  
A draught slips easily,  
Beneath the heavy door,  
And as bare feet stand,  
The five intruders lie,  
Fanned, 'poker-style',  
With no eyes to give away the truth.

A glossed and gaudy postcard,  
Filled with empty lines,  
A promise of unsought riches,  
And two brown, windowed bills,  
Highlight a small, white,  
Crisp cornered envelope.  
Five parallel lines,  
Placed dead centre,  
In a neatly sloping hand,  
Betrayed its innocence,  
And it lies unopened,  
Behind the clock.

### **The Organist**

Hands and feet pump  
In uneasy unison.  
Felt hat fixed in place  
By a long steel pin.  
Thick worsted woollen coat.  
Holds back the cold.  
Gloves and patent leather handbag  
Carefully positioned by the seat.  
You turn occasionally  
Towards the pulpit  
But only to check his progress  
A message heard many times before.  
The young minister  
Feels your eye  
Even when you stare ahead  
And knows this place belongs to you.

### **The Picture Frame**

Concealed amongst the artless goods  
An old man caught my eye  
Trapped behind the dusty glass  
Too proud for such a fate.  
Although heavier than it looked  
I took pleasure from its weight  
And turned the polished ebony  
Smooth and cool to touch.  
My finger caught the fragile hook  
And six images fell  
Face down upon the ground  
I knelt and lifted each in turn.  
And there, stolen from his mother's arms  
Stood a kilted warrior  
A volunteer for King and country  
Full of innocence and hope.  
The second struck a similar pose  
His rifle replaced by a tiny bride  
All Hollywood curls and austerity frills  
But his eyes no longer smiled.  
As I turned the third

A boy's face reflected his father's gaze  
Brylcreemed hair and a reluctant smile  
And the burden of his parents' dreams.  
The same face forced a tired grin  
Under mortar board and gown  
With all the arrogance of those who achieve  
At the expense of others.  
The last of the hidden trove  
Showed three tanned and handsome boys  
And scribbled on the back  
"Merry Christmas from us all in California".  
The old man's photo had its message too  
Sellotaped to the back as a yellowed cutting  
Illegible now except for the words  
"Bravely borne".

### **The playing field**

We can all escape to places deep within our minds  
Where memories are sharpened by the years  
Where essence is distilled and unadulterated  
And where movements slow and grow in grace.  
This piece of ground,  
This simple field of gloried pasture  
Where each square foot has special meaning  
For those who are here today  
For those who are long forgotten  
And those we have never known.  
This is our canvas  
Upon which to create our pictures  
Spontaneous and inspired,  
Accidental and deliberate  
Each brushstroke gives depth and meaning  
Take care of this land  
For this is a work in progress.

### **The Silver Pillow**

Waves break over conifered ridges  
Soundlessly spilling between standing hills  
The three Eildons becalmed on a silent sea  
Sink,  
One by one,  
No survivors.  
Unless,  
Like me ,  
You stand above the inevitable shroud.  
And then, without warning  
My time has come.  
It reaches up and round  
Drawing me in.  
The magic is broken.  
The silver pillow claims another victim.

### **The Smith**

With a steady rhythm you turned the handle,  
Gave simmering sparks a life of their own.  
The fire would light with a blazing yellow,  
As you kindled the coals with a dragon's breath.  
With your eyes all squinted from the devil's blast,  
You'd reach into it's sputtering mouth.  
And with blackened tongs you'd lift the gold,  
A sight to quicken any heart.  
And then, like a thunderclap,  
Ding dang the anvil rang!  
And your arm flashed with a madman's fury,  
As you reeled and danced around and 'round.  
Wide-eyed I'd watch you plunge the shoe,  
And hear it screaming with the steam,  
And the smoke would hang all round your head,  
As you took the horse's weight.  
And times you'd swear,  
Beneath your breath,  
"G'waa ye lang-nosed bugger!!"  
As a stubborn nag would set it's weight against your back.  
And through all this the folk would sit,  
From Old Keig or Auchnagathle,  
"Whit news o Pitnies' aullest loon?" they'd ask the Smith.  
And chat and joke and laugh till noon.  
And hours would slip by.  
It had always been,  
For one-hundred and sixty years,  
Father to father.  
Until the tractor,  
Severed the navel-cord.

In memory of my grandfather shoeing his last horse

### **The Teacher**

Passing through elongated hours  
Like a flat spinning stone,  
Skimming across the surface,  
Touching down and lifting off.  
Sleeping with our eyes open.  
Busily doing nothing.  
He knew,  
And we knew he knew.  
Catching us as we sped by,  
Pulling us down into his world,  
Confronting us with ourselves,  
Looking out through our eyes.  
Speaking to me, speaking to us,  
Thirty simultaneous conversations.  
He cared, cared that we didn't  
And smashed us about our heads,  
Armed only with knowledge  
And love for his subject.

An unlikely orchestra  
He played us, coaxed us.  
Daring us to stretch beyond our reach,  
To see something for ourselves,  
To see something of ourselves.  
A seed planted, that grows still.

### **The Try**

"This is great stuff"  
The ball tumbles on the grass  
"Phil Bennett covering"  
The fragile figure pulls it to his chest  
"Chased by Alastair Scown"  
The dancer vanishes from the giant's grasp  
"Brilliant.....oh that's brilliant"  
Not once but twice  
"John Williams.....Bryan Williams"  
Another heartbeat missed  
"Pullin"  
The ball slides from hand to hand  
"John Dawes"  
There's no way through  
"Great dummy"  
Hairs bristle on the neck  
"David.....Tom David"  
His headlong rush defies all laws of nature  
"The half-way line"  
An arm extends around a black back  
"Brilliant by Quinnell"  
Who lifts it from his toes and stumbles  
"This is Gareth Edwards!"  
He steals it from the air  
"A dramatic start!"  
Head thrown back in godlike flight  
"What a score!"  
A dive forever in slow motion  
"Oh that fellow Edwards"  
Mortality held at arms length  
"If the greatest writer of the written word  
had written that then no-one would have believed him."  
*with acknowledgements to Cliff Morgan*  
(*Excerpts from Cliff Morgan's commentary of the 1973 Barbarians versus The All Blacks by kind permission of the BBC.*)

### **The Word Measurer**

He loved his work, measuring words  
Turning them out from his heavy sack  
Where they tumbled on his oiled bench  
A treasure to behold  
And there,  
He'd take a master's pause,  
Immersed in that moment

Of Eucharistic worship  
Before committing to his choice  
To gently lift the singled word  
And place it on the scales,  
Defining its dimensions with the finest calipers.  
Then set between two kissing jaws  
He'd ease a tempered file between  
Each crevice, curve and corner  
Careful of the joins, the unseen links  
That only such an eye could see.  
Carefully working through  
Elongated adjectives  
Square nouns, round verbs  
The passive and perfective  
The common and bizarre  
Pairs and prepositions  
Elegant adverbs  
Languid words that poured  
As liquid honey  
Were each an object of devotion  
But one,  
An empty, black and hollowed word  
Refused his touch  
Defiled his eye  
And cast its spectre  
To perforate his sack,  
In thoughtless treachery,  
Spilling all before it.

### **Threesomes**

FBI, MI5, CIA  
UDA, UVF, IRA.  
Ph.D, MBA, B.Sc  
SAD, PMT, HIV.  
BEM, OBE, MBE  
BMA, NUM, NUT.  
REM, XTC, ABC  
BBC, ITV, RTE.  
GDR, UAE, USA  
KLM, TGV, BEA.  
MPG, TVR, MGB  
SRU, PGA, MCC.  
M&S, B&Q, MFI  
HMS, HMP, HMI.  
SNP, BNP, SDP  
QED, OTT, RIP.

### **Time Machine**

Climb aboard my time machine  
And visit moments where I've been  
A smell, a sound a photograph  
Each lead me down a different path.

### **True to Itself**

The Ash grows where it drops

Unwanted and unyielding  
But in reality an innocent  
Which is always last to enter  
And the first to leave,  
Collapsing to the ground  
On morning's first chill breath,  
Whilst the Alder sets its feet in water  
A pioneer of forlorn ground  
Only to be pushed out and forgotten  
When all its work is done,  
But the fragile Willow  
Filled with its facade of grace and delicacy  
Takes us in with pleasing eye  
Whilst slowly stretching underground  
And crushing all within its iron grip.

### **Unexpected Moment**

Through my own reflection  
I saw you standing there  
An unexpected moment  
I couldn't help but stare  
For in those fleeting seconds  
I saw not a mother or a wife  
Not a partner nor a lover  
But the heartbeat of my life  
I loved that simple moment  
And have locked it in my mind  
A treasure to be cherished  
With others of its kind  
Just to see you out of context  
To escape from background noise  
To be free from daily clutter  
To see your smile and your poise.  
So why does such a moment  
Give rise to such a shock  
Is it just that very closeness  
Which can build a mental block?  
Or has it more to do with living  
Just keeping everything on track  
The frantic bustle for survival  
Makes it a problem stepping back?  
So let me step inside that window  
And take you by the hand  
Let me catch that unexpected moment  
And block the falling sand  
And in those captured seconds  
Hold not a mother or a wife  
A partner nor a lover  
But the heartbeat of my life

### **Waterfall**

Black water flat  
Slowly speeding  
Bends its back

And silvers.  
Bursting to break free  
To fly alone,  
To fall,  
To float,  
In soundless flight,  
And land in gentle whispers,  
Which join hands,  
And shout their name  
Against the silence  
Of the wood.

### **Waves Against the Wind**

**We are waves against the wind And have two ways to reach the shore**  
**By keeping low we hide behind The crashing waves that lead the blind**  
**But those who dare to rise and fight And lead the charge in selfless flight**  
**Can bear their chests against the storm Their silver manes give god-like form**  
**They shout and roar their battle cry Whilst lifting up their pennants high**  
**Of danger they need take no heed And live their lives at reckless speed**  
**On reaching shallows stand their height Before they drop their heads mid-flight**  
**And crash and die and live no more Amidst those of us who slide ashore.**

### **What Are We at Liberty to Do?**

Think  
Who shapes our thoughts?  
Talk  
Who forms our words?  
Walk  
Who directs our steps?  
Sleep  
Who fills our dreams?  
Smile  
Who lifts our spirits?  
Fear  
Who stands in shadows?  
Hunger  
Who gives us food?  
Cold  
Who keeps us warm?  
Love  
Who says they care?  
Life  
Who takes our time?

### **Wild-eyed woman**

Sitting astride your black and shining steed  
1000cc Suzuki  
Something of the Navaho warrior squaw  
You charge headlong,  
Wild whoops and cries  
No time for wheeling 'round circled wagons  
When deeds need doing  
And tempus flies

### **Willie Elliot**

You held your old friend on your knee  
As a proud father would sit his child.  
One hand draped over its shoulder  
And the other absently tracing silent rhythms  
On the ivory dots.  
And as the fire roared  
I sat with my brothers, quietly  
Playing with our three day old toys  
But keeping one eye on the dram  
You slowly sipped.  
And when at last you set it down  
Our toys were soon forgot.  
And the heat on our backs can warm me now  
As I call the moment back.  
You pulled open your magic box  
And checked your fingers for the only time  
Before setting them on a road  
They'd travelled many a time before.  
Your right foot never stopped  
Taking on a life of its own  
Not needing any thought  
To mark the four eight time.  
And the sound cut through  
The layers of blue smoke.  
As you took us to  
"The Dark Island" and "The Sweet Lass o Bonn Accord".  
And your eyes would dance all round the room.  
And settle on us all in turn  
Taking hold of toes and fingers  
And into step we all would fall  
And fairly come together.  
Damn you John Logie Baird!!!

### **Winter Assassin**

November sun  
Knives  
With murderous ease.  
Its horizontal blade  
Slides,  
Between the standing stones  
Felling giants  
With a smile.